STRENGTHENING BONDS

A message from Bishop Duca

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On Tuesday, Dec. 3, I had an opportunity with the Bishops of Region V (which includes the dioceses of Louisiana) and Region IV to have a visit with the Holy Father, Pope Francis. The encounter was a joy. Pope Francis addressed us as brothers in Christ and led an open and relaxed conversation with all the Bishops inviting us to ask whatever we wanted. The Holy Father answered all the questions directly with an honest but always pastoral answer. He modeled for us the kind of encounter he wants us all to have with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

It was the highlight of my ad limina visit as your Bishop.

All the Bishops extended our sincere and heartfelt words of support and love for the Holy Father. In my brief personal greeting, I assured him that we were all praying for him as the Vicar of Christ. I pass on to you that he asked that we continue to pray for him as he is in need of our prayers.

The visit filled me with HOPE because I believe that Jorge Bergoglio, Francis our Pope, was truly chosen by the Holy Spirit to speak the Gospel to us in a new way in order to witness the redemptive mercy and love of Jesus Christ. He is witnessing not only a way to deepen and renew our commitment to Christ but he is also showing us a way to become missionary disciples who are called to bring, to a broken and fallen world, the joy and healing of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

†MICHAEL
Michael G. Duca
Bishop of Baton Rouge

(Founder's Note: The ad limina visit to which the Bishop refers is more formally called ad limina Apostolorum. It is a periodic meeting all bishops of the world must have with the Holy Father in Rome. The Latin term literally means "to the threshold of the Apostles." Each bishop has in advance prepared and submitted a lengthy report on his diocese, and the bishops discuss pertinent matters with key Vatican departments that assist the Pope in the governance of the Church. The bishops also concelebrate Masses at the basilicas in Rome, including St. Peter's and St. Paul's Outside the Walls, where they venerate the tombs of the two Holy Apostles.)

Finding God in the holiday blues

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

When holiday blues turn black through substance abuse or any other addiction, people need treatment, support and ultimately God’s healing hand, say medical experts and clergy of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Dr. Robert Case Harvey, who specializes in neurology and psychology and is affiliated with Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, said the number of substance abuse cases in the emergency room drops off during the holidays but quickly added there is an uptick shortly after as people cope with post-holiday blues.

“People are out, partaking in alcohol and things that they can get their hands on,” said Harvey. “After the holidays itself there’s a comedown that’s a result of their use, because it’s not sustainable for most people.

“With every up there’s a down. When people are intoxicated it feels good and they forget their problems, but afterwards they’ve released a lot of dopamine and other addictive creating chemicals in their brain. They feel more depressed, more dysphoric, more despondent and unrest. That’s when they come into the emergency room for treatment.”

The number of attempted suicides treated in the emergency room also spikes after the...
O celebrate!

We have reached the point in the Christmas countdown where you don’t have to count how many days but how many Os are left. The Roman Catholic Church has been singing the O Antiphons, also known as “the great Os (not to be confused with a popular LSU coach),” since at least the eighth century. O Antiphons are the verses for the ancient hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and the seven antiphons that accompany the Magnificat canticle of Liturgy of the Hours for Vespers from Dec. 17-23, with Dec. 24 the Christmas Eve Vigil.

They are described as “a magnificant theology that uses ancient biblical imagery drawn from the messianic hopes of the Old Testament to proclaim the coming of Christ as the fulfillment not only of Old Testament hopes, but present ones as well. Their repeated use of the imperative ‘Come!’ bids him to hurry and come.”

Each antiphon is a name of Latin Messianic title for Christ:

- Wisdom (Sapientia)
- Lord of Israel (Adonai)
- Root of Jesse (Radix Jesse)
- Key of David (Clavis David)
- Rising Dawn (Oriens)
- King of the Gentiles (Rex Gentium)
- Emanuel (Emmanuel, God with us)

Websites are filled with creative ideas to celebrate the O Antiphons. You can make printable 3-D O Antiphon ornaments and place them on your Jesse or Christmas tree each evening of the antiphons.

Or you can make an O Antiphon Poinsettia wreath. Emphasizing that “homestretch to Christmas” can be done by constructing an O Antiphon house, a small cardboard house with seven windows, each hiding the appropriate symbol for the O Antiphon of the day. Be sure to include an eighth window with an altar for Vigil Mass and ninth window depicting the Nativity scene for Christmas Day. The house can be drawn on flat cardboard, or later shaped into a tower, by bending the cardstock into a circle.

And of course, what’s a celebration of the antiphons without food? While doing this you are reviving the old custom of the monks at different monasteries furnishing extra treats on these days to the members of the community. You can bake Christmas cookies in the shapes symbolizing the theme of the various antiphons. Adhere some O Antiphon imagery to your chocolate gold coin wrappers and turn them into O Antiphon chocolate gold coins. These could recall the spirit of the psalmist when he wrote: “Taste and see how good the Lord is” (Ps 33:9).

Those fond of wordplay will find something in the O Antiphons for them as well. Reverse the titles for Christ, which then becomes Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai and Sapientia— and they spell out ERO CRAS, meaning, “Tomorrow, I will come.”

An excellent and spiritual way to end Advent and celebrate the coming of Christ!
People’s hearts yearn for God, not possessions, status, pope says

VATICAN CITY – The Christmas season is a time to reflect on what life is all about, Pope Francis told an international group of performers.

“The time before Christmas calls us to ask ourselves, ‘What is it that I am waiting for in my life? What is the great desire of my heart?’ You too, with your songs, help awaken or reawaken this healthy human ‘yearning’ in the hearts of many people,” he said.

The pope met Dec. 13 with the group of singers, songwriters, musicians and conductors the day before they were to perform in the Vatican’s Paul VI hall for a benefit concert to help protect the Amazon and support indigenous communities there.

The lineup was scheduled to include: Lionel Richie, the U.S. Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter; Susan Boyle, who was a 2009 finalist on “Britain’s Got Talent;” and Bonnie Tyler, whose songs “It’s a Heartache” and “Total Eclipse of the Heart” are among the best-selling singles of all time.

The Charleston Gospel Choir and several Italian performers were also part of the lineup for the 2019 “Christmas Concert in the Vatican,” sponsored by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education.

The pope told the performers and concert organizers that God is the author of the “yearning” people feel in their heart, “and he comes to meet us by this route.”

“Dear artists, I thank you for all that you do. I wish you the best for your activities and your spiritual growth,” the pope said, asking that their hearts be touched by the “mystery of Christmas, so that you can convey some of that same tenderness to those who listen to you.”

Donations and proceeds from ticket sales were to go toward a Salesian project helping indigenous communities in northwestern Brazil and to a campaign of Scholas Occurrentes to raise awareness in 450,000 schools around the world promoting reforestation.

The show, recorded before a live audience Dec. 14, was to be broadcast by Italian television Christmas Eve.

Later in the day, Pope Francis was scheduled to take part – via live video link-up – in the launch of a U.S. headquarters of Scholas Occurrentes, which is Latin for “schools for encounter.”

The global educational project, launched by Pope Francis in 2013, works to encourage social integration – and a culture of encounter among high school students through sports, arts and technology.

Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles, the city’s mayor, Eric Garcetti, along with about 30 Catholic high school students of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, were to join in from Los Angeles in the live videoconference as were Scholas students in Haiti, Japan and Spain.
By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Basking in the afterglow of the “Baton Rouge Big Buddy 40th Birthday Bash” block party in October, program organizers brought out a large green storage tub full of nostalgic photos and laughed as they shared “remember when...” adventure stories of driving vehicles full of underprivileged children to local activities, campouts and on road trips so they could dream about who they could become.

Sadly, the organizers noted, today’s unstable world calls for a mound of paperwork to be completed before they can do the things they did, which would have made it nearly impossible for the program to launch. But by being “in the right place at the right time” and the commitment of the faith community and students at Christ the King Church at LSU, the program thrives.

In 1975, before the pre-school programs became prevalent, Mary West decided to teach underprivileged children. “I had the house and I was already teaching my children,” said West.

To get an introduction into their neighborhoods, West approached a woman in the Home Start Program, which assists families in finding housing. A teacher for the program brought children to her house for the first year. After that, West drove her SUV into the housing projects in the Roosevelt, East, Garfield and McKinley streets areas, picked up kids and taught them in her home.

“I got to know the mothers, and in some situations the fathers and the neighbors in the neighborhoods,” West said.

West got to know the older siblings of the children she taught.

“They had to walk to school and didn’t have any after-school activities. They were just hanging out,” said West.

West was attending Christ the King and dropped off her kids for childcare provided by LSU students. The students talked to West about an off-campus mentoring class project they were doing called “The Big Buddy Program” and they wanted to continue working with the kids after the class was over.

West partnered with the students and formalized the program with Jim Geisler, who was its first executive director. Members of the Christ the King social justice committee were on the first board of directors.

CTK students and volunteers cleared a field to turn into a park. Big Buddy volunteers collected money to buy the field, which was matched by BREC and it became a Roosevelt Street BREC park.

In addition to taking kids to the park, big buddies would take their little buddies to the library, state capitol or to watch the boats on the river.

Ralph Stephens, an original Big Buddy board member, mentor and law student at LSU when Big Buddy started, said the trips to the library meant a lot to the little buddies because many of them did not have a book in their home, other than the Bible.

“I would be asked, ‘What do CPA’s do? What do lawyers do? ’ ” said Stephens, who was happy to help children envision a brighter future.

Nancy Keegan, who was a member of Christ the King and original staff member of Big Buddy said, “The children gave me love and laughter.”

Keegan said they taught her as much as she taught them.

“They showed amazing resilience and strength,” Keegan said. “They gave me many amazing insights into life.”

What the kids wanted most, according to Stephens and Keegan, was to have fun.

A highlight for the kids was piling up in cars and going to Leo’s Roller Rink on North Street. They wore black T-shirts with yellow print that said, “Sky Hawks.” They also sang at Kiwanis Club meetings.

“They (children) would say, ‘Okay, page 22, Old MacDonald had a Farm (their standard song to sing in public),’” beamed Gaulyn Mack, current executive director of Big Buddy and director of religious education and extraordinary minister of the Eucharist at St. Francis Xavier Church in Baton Rouge. She has been involved with Big Buddy since the 1980s.

Mack and West also talked about early camping trips at a camp near what was then rural Flannery Road.

“You walked through the gates and you knew you were in the wilderness,” said West. Big Buddy later partnered with Camp Fire Boys and Girls and provided activities for kids whose schools were closed as well as after-school activities for those who were in school.

“The kids were out of school with nothing to do, parents were stressed, so we thought, ‘What can we do?’ ” said Mack.

“What we can do is gather up our sticks, pipe cleaners and provide them with something to do.”

They worked with BREC to provide group activities as well.

Big Buddy leaders received training during those times from a national agency which works with kids in trauma, which has proven valuable even today because of shootings and other societal problems, Mack noted.

Big Buddy’s mission remains to help children make good decisions and to be their advocates. It helps middle school and high school students prepare for post-graduation and to go into the workforce and college. They also assist schools in high-poverty areas to find funding.

Big Buddy educates the community on the vital role youth play in the community’s future.

“Everything we do in the community should have a young people’s component – what are we doing for our youth? What are we doing to help with early childhood education?” Mack said.

“What we are doing for our young people is good for all people. Young people need to understand character, about loving others and working together for a better community,” he added.

To learn more about Big Buddy, visit bigbuddyprogram.org.
Volunteers celebrate birthdays with SJV students

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

Bundled up in coats and sweatshirts over school uniforms, almost 475 students from kindergarten through eighth-graders gathered on sidewalks and second-floor balconies surrounding the courtyard at St. Jean Vianney School in Baton Rouge.

With one collective happy and very loud chorus, the children sang “Happy Birthday” to Jeannette Abadie and Claire Landry, long-time volunteers at the school. Afterwards, the ladies blew out the birthday candles adorning their donut cake, shaped in the numbers 79 and 90 respectively.

“Been volunteering at St. Jean Vianney since 2006,” said Landry, who turned 90 on Dec. 3. “All we’ve known, Jeannette and I, is education. It’s all we’ve known all our lives. It seemed like a comfortable situation to be in again.”

That situation presented itself after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. At the time, the ladies were living in St. Bernard Civil Parish. Abadie was working part-time in education while Landry was the guidance counselor at Archbishop Hannan High School in Meraux. In the aftermath, everything was gone – homes, jobs, church parishes, schools and communities.

It was the second time in the lives of these women that a hurricane had affected their lives. The first, Hurricane Betsy in 1965, is the storm that brought them together in the first place.

As team teachers at an elementary school, Landry and Abadie shared some of the same students and “we got to be good friends.” They also became family, as evidenced in how they tell their story, helping each other along with facts.

“And the storm came,” explained Abadie. “I was living alone — my roommate had gotten married — and Claire said, ‘I think you better come to my house tonight’ because of the approaching storm.”

“Hurricane Betsy,” interjected Landry. “She (Landry), her husband (Larry) and two kids and I evacuated to her parents’ home, which was sort of not too far away, and I never left because I started living with her parents,” recalled Abadie, who was 25 at the time. “They told me a young girl couldn’t go back and live alone in an apartment.”

“That was in those days and my dad couldn’t see her alone,” added Landry. “They had a big house and my mother was still living (in Edgard) so they had to ask my mother permission so I could live with them,” said Abadie. “So, I became a part of their family.”

“My dad was old-fashioned,” Landry said.

The women continued on their paths in education, eventually earning higher degrees and administrative positions. Abadie taught for many years in St. Bernard before earning a master’s degree in guidance counseling from Loyola University in New Orleans and becoming assistant principal at Andrew Jackson High School in Chalmette.

Landry earned a master’s degree in education from Loyola University, a doctor of education degree from University of New Orleans and a law degree from Loyola. She taught elementary school in St. Tammany and St. Bernard civil parishes; was principal of Andrew Jackson High School in Chalmette; was associate superintendent of elementary schools in East Jefferson and St. Bernard civil parishes for the Archdiocese of New Orleans. In 1978, Landry was elected to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, where she served for 15 years, including three as president.

Through the years, Abadie melded into family life with Landry and her siblings. After Landry’s parents passed away, Abadie was asked to move in with one of Landry’s sisters, who was newly widowed with grown children.

Then in August 2005, life changed dramatically and traumatically for millions living along the coast of Louisiana and so it did for this family. Abadie, along with Landry, Landry’s husband and siblings evacuated and resettled in Baton Rouge, purchasing houses in the neighborhood located in St. Jean Vianney Church parish. The women note the welcoming environment helped to ease the transition into a new life somewhat.

“I have to give people in the St. Jean Vianney congregation a thanks for making us feel comfortable in the church,” said Abadie. “We lost our church community, our neighborhood, our school community ... so you have to start all over again. And the people reached out to use and welcomed us. I fell in love with the parish immediately and (pastor) Father Tom Ranzino was wonderful ...”

“Thank goodness,” interjected Landry.

“They helped us get our life back together,” added Abadie.

“Yes, because that was an awful feeling, when you move, you know nobody,” finished Landry.

One year after getting settled, Abadie said she and Landry were ready to give back in exchange for the help given to them. So, approaching school officials...

See Birthday Page 8

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The Catholic Commentator

Mail to: The Catholic Commentator, P. O. Box 3316, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-3316
Anxiety and Mass attendance/Armenian Church

Q I was diagnosed with anxiety/mood disorder in 2003. I had spent time in the military and gone through some horrific experiences that had affected me emotionally. I have also been on Dilantin now for more than 25 years because of seizures. My psychiatrist has explained to me that I find sounds and smells much more intense due to the seizure medication. Prior to joining the military, I had enjoyed going to Mass. I would arrive early to pray before Mass started, and I found it fulfilling and joyful. As a child, I had attended Catholic school and was an altar server. Now, though, the experience of Mass is for me very stressful. People often sit nearby who have been smoking before coming to church, and this causes me to feel very nauseous. Other times, young children misbehave, throwing toys or books, causing me to feel so stressed that I get up and stand in the back of the church for the rest of the Mass.

So my question is this: Would it be a mortal sin if I stopped going to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation due to the harmful effect it is having on my mental and emotional health? (Charleston, South Carolina)

A People committed to regular religious practice have been shown to have a more positive outlook on life than those who seldom or never attend church. A 2019 research project done by the Christian polling firm Barna Group, for example, found that 28 percent of young people said they often feel sad or depressed versus 18 percent of practicing Christians and that, while 16 percent of young practicing Christians reported feeling “lonely or isolated from others,” 31 percent of those with no faith confessed to feeling that way.

In general, then, church attendance while being the right thing to do morally seems also to carry a psychological benefit. But there can be individual exceptions to that, and your own situation may well be one. And so, it would not be a mortal sin if you stopped going to Mass on Sundays and holy days. I believe that your diagnosed anxiety/mood disorder, coupled with your heightened sensitivity to smells and sounds, dispenses you from regular attendance. Your disease is as real as any high fever or flu.

But at the same time, I don’t want you to be deprived of the Eucharist, which I take to be the highest form of prayer and the strongest help to Christian holiness. Would you be comfortable going to Mass instead on a weekday, when there would be fewer distractions and hazards to your sense of peace? And rather than taking guidance simply from me, why not talk this over with your pastor or another priest whom you know?

Q I have a friend who received baptism, confirmation, and first Eucharist as a child in the Armenian Church. For the past 25 years, though, he has attended a Catholic church weekly and receives the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation. He supports the Catholic Church both financially and with time and talent. They were told by a nun that this is OK, but recently they heard something on a Catholic radio channel that is making them doubt that. This friend is more Catholic in his actions than most of my friends who were born Catholic. Is there any advice you can give that might relieve his anxiety? (Largo, Florida)

A You should tell you first that there is a slight possibility that your friend is already a Catholic. The Armenian Catholic Church is one of about two dozen Eastern Catholic churches that are in full communion with Rome and accept the doctrine of papal primacy. More likely, though, he belongs to the Armenian Orthodox Church. (While there are about 35,000 Armenian Catholics in the United States, Armenian Orthodox number nearly half a million.)

So what would your friend need to do to become a Catholic? He would need only to make a profession of faith, a declaration that he believes all that the Catholic Church teaches. Most significantly, he would not need to be re-baptized or re-confirmed, since those Orthodox sacraments he has already received are recognized as valid by the Catholic Church. (Likewise, his reception of holy Communion as an Orthodox Christian has been a validly consecrated Eucharist.)

Q Every Mass I attend begins with a penitential rite, which I take to be the forgiveness of sins for those who are there worshiping. And then, just before Communion, we say, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” Why, then, does the church require Catholics to go to confession? (Russellville, Arkansas)

A It is true, as you indicate, that several times throughout the Mass we indicate our unworthiness to participate in such a sacred act. However, none of these expressions of sinfulness and sorrow is equivalent to sacramental absolution, and they do not dispense us from the obligation of confessing grave sins before receiving holy Communion.

The church’s Code of Canon Law states clearly that “a member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess his sins in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the church nor acknowledged in individual confession” (Canon 988.1). Grave, or “mortal,” sins are those involving serious matter, committed with knowledge of their gravity and the deliberate consent of the will. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the church’s official “guidebook” on liturgy, notes, “the priest calls upon the whole community to take part in the penitential act, which, after a brief pause for silence, it does by means of a formula of general confession. The rite concludes with the priest’s absolution, which, however, lacks the efficacy of the sacrament of penance” (No. 51).

The penitential rite (as well as the reception of Communion and other acts of prayer and devotion) can, though, forgive venial sins. Strictly speaking, one is obliged to go to the sacrament of penance only for serious sins although it is certainly a good idea to confess regularly even for lesser sins and imperfections. In 2013, Pope Francis revealed that he himself goes to confession every two weeks and considers it the best path to spiritual healing and health.

FATHER DOYLE is a retired priest in the Diocese of Albany, New York. Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, NY 12203.
Teens consecrate lives to Jesus through Mary

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

A group of youth at St. Joseph Church in Ponchatoula are navigating their teenage years with the help of Mary who drew them into a deeper knowledge of her son Jesus in a Marian consecration focusing on the mysteries of the rosary.

The group made their consecration Dec. 15.

Mary Hanks, 15, who led the group, said the book, “Total Consecration Through the Mysteries of the Rosary,” by Father Ed Brown OMV, is a self-guided retreat that directs the reader to contemplate the mysteries of the rosary and the seven sorrows of Mary. The book provides meditations, prayers and practical steps to deepen a relationship with Jesus through his mother.

“The book prepares you for the consecration and for adulthood. To think about her love and devotion to Jesus,” Hanks said.

The teens met on Sundays and engaged in several activities, which Hanks found through Pinterest, that emphasized the book’s messages.

For Amelie Dupuy, 14, the preparation for consecration has been a call to pray more.

“Before this I never had a prayer life; I went to church and did what I had to do,” said Dupuy, who has known Hanks for a long time and was glad she gave her own “yes” to join the group.

For Dupuy and the rest of the group members, the biggest challenge was making time for daily readings.

“Life gets crazy and when you get home you just want to sleep and relax,” said Dupuy. “There’s a lot of pressure to put it off, but I’ve been putting myself into it.”

Her efforts have yielded many graces.

“The best part is the realization that even if you feel low, Mary is with you and God loves you,” she said.

Gavin Hoffmann, 15, said he also joined the group at Hanks’s prompting and found it to be beneficial for his faith as well as fun.

“It’s been good to pray all the prayers and read about the sacrifices Mary had to do,” said Hoffmann.

For Marianna Fulks, 13, of Albany, attending the meeting required her to get up early to travel to St. Joseph, but it was worth it.

“I enjoy the emotion (expressed in the book), because I’m not emotional,” said Fulks. “When I read the book it puts me in the perspective of knowing how she (Mary) felt. I can get a sense of what it was. I have two sisters and I always look after them, so her motherhood, I can relate to that.”

She added the consecration is good preparation for adolescence.

“I’ve noticed, going into the teenage years, you see a lot of things you didn’t see when you were younger,” she said. “You’re going to find challenges that will affect the rest of your life. I think this reminds us of all of that. When I’m faced with challenges I can think of how Mary dealt with other people and calm down and think about her life.

“Mary was perfect. People now would ridicule you for such things (purity and devotion to Jesus). They think bad things are cool so they would probably pick on you and say, ‘You’re not doing the cool things.’ I think she probably had to deal with it back then too. I think it was cool how she was able to deal with that and be perfect too.”

Hank’s sister, Anna, 13, said she enjoyed the beautiful imagery of Mary as queen of heaven with a crown of 12 stars, but she was also drawn to her humanness.

“She was human. She was perfect, but the world around her challenged her and that was difficult,” said Anna Hanks.

Which for Anna meant the Blessed Mother and Jesus would have the best understanding of her own struggles.

“Sometimes the chapters make you have a conversation with Jesus and Mary in the sense you are with them and you just talk to Jesus about your problems,” said Anna Hanks.

Watch for your copy of the 2020 Mass Schedule in the Jan. 3 issue of The Catholic Commentator
know him, love him and serve him and that we could see his face and have new life.

St. Alphonsus de Liguori writes, “Now this God, so great, has become a little infant and for whom? A child is born to us: for us he is born. And wherefore? St. Ambrose gives us the answer: ‘He is a little one, that you might us he is born. And wherefore? St. Alphonsus Liguori, The Incarnation, Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ. edit. Rev. Eugene Grimm, (Brooklyn, NY: Redemptorist Fathers, 1927), 34).

**Draw near**

Pope Francis reflects that as we set up our Nativity, we draw near to the moment salvation entered the darkness “wrapped” with stars of hope; a hope filled with the knowledge that God will never abandon us. We draw near to the touchable, extreme poverty of Jesus, our savior, laying on straw meant to feed animals. We draw near to the coldness of a cave, only to realize God is our shelter and in him is our refuge. We draw near to the poor shepherds, first to hear of the coming of the savior, to momentarily cover out of fear, but then in knowing, are taken over in joy!

We draw near to a mother, obedient and graced, and a foster father, staff in hand, as they are the first to tenderly hold, protect and feed the one who has come to hold, protect and feed us. We draw near to the reverence given by three magis who come from afar, bearing gifts from the earth and of themselves, then bearing witness to others along their path. We draw near to the holiness of this real, historical moment, made present by the holiness of our lives today. How can I “relive” the magnificence of the Incarnation as depicted in the Nativity scene?

**The Nativity for us today**

Gospel calls us to holiness, as seen in Mary and Joseph; to stay away from the darkness of sin that rips us to the very core and to turn and follow the stars of hope which light our path; to know him in sacred Scripture, as the angel proclaimed; to reverently come to him at Mass, just as the shepherds and magi knelt before him in the stable; and to be fed by him in the Eucharist, foreshadowed by the manger. Ultimately, the Nativity is the reality of God’s desire for you, for me, for all of us to draw near to him. God desires us to be near to him; to come home. Step into the Nativity scene. Come home for Christmas.

Pope Francis concludes his letter by writing, “... the Christmas creche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith ... it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God’s love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him ... thanks to that child who is the son of God and son of the Virgin Mary ... and to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness.”

May the sign of the Nativity draw us nearer to Christ Jesus and be where we find our true happiness and a peace today and each day to come. Amen. Merry Christmas. O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God! (O Antiphon of Advent, Dec. 23)

(Note: Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter “Admirabile Signum (Wonderful Sign): On the Meaning and Importance of the Nativity Scene” may be found on the Vatican website http://w2.vatican.va/)

**Dow is director of the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge.**

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**BIRTHDAY**

From page 5

to volunteer was the next likely step for the long-time educators.

At first, the ladies were asked to help students who needed assistance with test taking. Eventually, they were asked to work two days a week from 9 a.m. – noon to help with more administrative duties such as copying paperwork, stuffing envelopes and filing. Though no longer working with students, the atmosphere still brings joy to both women.

“We get to see the students and hear them on the playground and all that is good music to me,” said Abadie. “It is to me too because all I’ve ever known is education,” said Landry. “To me there’s nothing sadder than an empty schoolhouse.”

“They have been such an important part of our school community and the kids have really enjoyed getting to know them,” said St. Jean Vianney principal Wendy Ross. “This community just loves these ladies.”

Now, celebrating their birthdays together (Abadie’s birthday was just a few days earlier on Nov. 29) with the whole school joining in, Abadie and Landry were overwhelmed by hugs and stacks of handmade birthday cards from the children. They have been able to find a new life, while holding on to old connections.

Every Tuesday, they gather with friends from St. Bernard Parish for lunch at one of five restaurants near their neighborhood. They both also have nieces and nephews who live in the Baton Rouge area.

“So we’ve got family and friends and co-workers – life is good,” said Abadie. “I’m happy here now,” said Landry. “It was quite an adjustment. The Lord puts you where you’re supposed to be, I feel.”

“And I feel good comes from something bad, because look where we are,” noted Abadie. “And Wendy (Ross) and the teachers here have been most welcoming,” finished Landry.
Re-entry remains a difficult process for ex-inmates

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

The encouraging news is Louisiana no longer leads the country and the world with the highest prison population per capita (that title now goes to Oklahoma) thanks to sweeping criminal justice reforms measures passed in 2017 but there remains plenty of work to be done in helping the formerly incarcerated transition back into society, according to Rhett Covington, assistant secretary of the Louisiana Department of Corrections.

Covington, a guest speaker at the recent bi-annual Chaplains’ Luncheon sponsored by Prison Ministry/Joseph Homes of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, gave an update on the state of the state’s prison system, including the construction of a new Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW) on the grounds of the Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel. The previous location of LCIW, also in St. Gabriel, was damaged in the 2016 flood.

“The footprint is on the opposite side of Hunt on higher ground,” said Covington. “The building plans include a set of program buildings between Hunt and LCIW that can be shared between the two facilities like a university type setting.”

Covington added the $110 million dollar facility is still short of funding, and construction is at least three to five years away.

Covington said the DOC’s idea of transitioning from “security and punitive” to “rehabilitation and education” began as early as 2001.

He said that by 2010, DOC “began to house more and more people in local jails due to the war on crime.” That meant inmates from south Louisiana would end up in rural parts of north Louisiana, according to Covington. And state facilities were beginning to offer opportunities for education and skills training that were lacking on the local front.

“We began to look at local jail programs and the goal was to try to get those people closer to home and to make sure they needed to be in the local facilities,” explained Covington.

As of December 2018, DOC reported 14,880 offenders in state facilities and 17,517 in local facilities. Covington said other state prison programs have a larger concentration of population and more money involved in operations, staffing and programs for re-entry.

Regional hubs were created to assess needs of each offender, he explained. Hubs also provide a 60-day re-entry program and services to prepare someone for release. It also provides a place for families to visit and reconnect before the person is released.

“Regional hubs have done a good job in helping us understand how to connect people across the state,” Covington added.

He said DOC has worked to enroll inmates in Medicaid and apply for Social Security replacement cards, identification cards and birth certificates. He added that programs utilized by the department include the TIGER (Targeted Interventions Gaining Enhanced Re-entry) assessment, developed by LSU, to assess risks and needs; and ATLO, based in Hammond, which is software that provides a secure environment for computer-based testing for the GED and other certifications.

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Covington said there are at least 15 computer stations at every prison and Chromebooks are available. WiFi is also being installed at prisons.

However, it’s all monitored and security driven with cameras watching at all times and firewalls that will shut down a computer and take a picture of the user if a keystroke goes beyond the parameters.

Though the computers might open the channels to communication and education, they cannot take the place of human interaction and acceptance in society.

“When someone calls me about prison ministry the first thing I’m going to ask them is, ‘If the offender leaves prison tomorrow, can they come to your church and sit in the pew next to your people?’” said Covington. “And, if they tell me no, I’m going to say, ‘Have a nice day.’

Covington recalled his time as a field agent years ago when he identified a large concentration of churches in an area of Baton Rouge. He said he asked each church to adopt one person being released from prison but was turned down.

“Anytime we have people returning to the community, and 95 percent of the people who are incarcerated will at one point or another come back to the community again, we have to allow them space at the table,” Covington said. “We have to have someone to give them a helping hand, someone to walk with them, particularly if they’ve been gone for a long time, life has changed.

“It’s very important for people of faith to not only think about how we can see these people who are returning to our communities as brothers and sisters in Christ, as children of God, and not judge them on the single worst action in their life and therefore keep them at arm’s length.”

He said it’s important for chaplains and others who work in prison ministry to spread the message to help the formerly incarcerated return to society and become a “voice for those who are voiceless.”

“Community support is needed and not just community support in kicking them to the curb or saying, ‘Hey, lock them up,’ but support in the ‘Hey brother, Hey sister, how can we get you back into treatment again, how can we get you the help that you need?’” Covington said.

“Why do we want to doom somebody because we don’t want to take the time to care for them? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Covington, a parishioner at St. Alphonsus Ligouri Church in Greenwell Springs, said he views his job as a ministry and a vocation “that the Lord has called me to and I love it.”

“I’m frustrated on many days and I turn it over to him and I trust him,” he said. “I find myself as a Catholic man very fortunate and blessed to live my faith every day.”

For more information on how to become a volunteer with prison ministry, contact Jay Jackson, chaplain at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, at 225-235-5845.
Church Renovation
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

Parishioners, visitors and guests at Immaculate Conception Church in Baton Rouge were greeted by smiling ushers as they walked through the massive glass foyer flooded with sunshine on Dec. 15 for a special Mass for the blessing of the church celebrated by Bishop Michael G. Duca, with assistance of Bishop Emeritus Robert W. Muench, 13 priests from the Diocese of Baton Rouge and several deacons.

“People really love it,” said pastor Father Tom Clark. “They’re very happy with the renovation. They find it very beautiful and are very proud of it.”

One year after the project began, the church is finished. Everything is new, from air conditioning and heating to wiring, plumbing, lighting, flooring and furnishings. There are even new spaces including restrooms, storage, sacristy and chancel area.

“Tears first time I got on the organ,” recalled Nina Gray, the Gospel choir director. “Just to hear the acoustics and just to be in the new church, it was a spiritual moment for me.”

Gray said the “highlight” for her is having the choir located on the same level as the altar.

“We just love the renovation, it is fabulous. We’re so proud of what they did,” said parishioner Rogers Jackson.

Project manager and Immaculate Conception parishioner Ron Lewis said he met with architect Craig Sauviac and the contractor weekly and was able to finish on time.

“At the beginning of the Mass, the bishop, along with Father Clark and several other priests blessed the congregation and walls with holy water.

“Father Tom, parishioners of Immaculate Conception – Beautiful! Beautiful!” said Bishop Duca during his homily as the congregation broke into a thunderous applause.

“When I look at this, I see beauty but I see something that’s even more important because this doesn’t happen. This building doesn’t come alive unless it’s built by living stones, and this church is what it is today because faith is alive at Immaculate Conception.”

Bishop Duca blessed and incensed the altar, the congregation and the space of the church. The altar was then dressed by parishioners before the liturgy of the Eucharist by the bishop.

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The 66-year-old church was originally dedicated on Dec. 13, 1953. Now, a new church, newly blessed welcomes the future, thanks to the current members.

“It was all due to the generosity and the dedication of the parishioners,” said Father Clark. “They supported this project fully and were extremely generous.”

Parishioners dressed the altar after Bishop Duca blessed it.
St. Nick brings Christmas joy to all who see him

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

Wearing a bright red shirt and pants, topped off with a green fleece jacket, Greg Oivanki walks into a Baton Rouge grocery with his wife Sarah who is pushing a grocery cart and checking out the produce. All around them, shoppers do double takes while store employees smile and talk about their behavior, naughty or nice, with this special customer, one who looks exactly like Santa Claus.

“I told the guys I’d put in a good word for them but I think they made the naughty list this year,” smiled a supervisor as she walked past a second time. “I’ve been good.”

“Man, I’ve got four grandkids, they’ve all been good – even though I’m not,” laughed another employee stocking shelves down an aisle. “Take care of the babies, please!”

“No problem!” said Oivanki.

With large expressive eyes, a turned up nose, ready smile and distinctive laugh, Oivanki did not aspire to the role he now finds himself playing, either Santa or St. Nicholas. It just evolved, he said, when he began growing a beard after he was laid off from his job as an engineer in the petrochemical industry.

“People said, ‘You ought to be Santa,’ or St. Nicholas. It just clicked, and as a cantor at Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs, Oivanki, a baritone, and his wife both sing in the Baton Rouge Symphony chorus. and his long gray hair will continue to grow, he said, brushing it back with his fingers, to

the consternation of his wife. Oivanki, a cancer survivor, said he planned to grow it for five years then donate it to make wigs for people with cancer. He has two more years to go.

“I’m used to him with short hair. I watch him combing this long stuff out in the morning…” Sarah trails off, shaking her head.

Oivanki most recently played St. Nicholas, the Catholic saint, at a pancake breakfast fundraiser at Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs. The event raised money for students to attend the March for Life campaign in Washington, D.C. in January. Photo provided by Rozalyn Duplantis

“I told the guys I’d put in a good word for them but I think they made the naughty list this year.”

Greg Oivanki
St. Nicholas

Oivanki recalled playing Santa at a festival at his church in 2017 on a day set aside for elementary school children.

“That was a lot of fun,” he said. “Of course, I got some comments about my outfit…” Those aren’t really boots,’ I had some chaps on. Now, I have a pair of boots with fur on top so it looks more authentic. But I learned my lesson from that. You pick up things from that.”

And his long gray hair will continue to grow, he said, brushing it back with his fingers, to

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Greg Oivanki plays St. Nicholas, the Catholic saint, at a pancake breakfast fundraiser at Immaculate Conception Church in Denham Springs. The event raised money for students to attend the March for Life campaign in Washington, D.C. in January. Photo provided by Rozalyn Duplantis

Baton Rouge Symphony chorus.

and his wife both sing in the Baton Rouge Symphony chorus. This musical Santa also plays six instruments including piano, organ, trumpet, flute, guitar, banjo and mandolin and plans to write an arrangement for the song “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” for the symphony to perform.

And, like his jolly counterpart, Oivanki speaks the language of children all over the world – or at least in eight countries. He is fluent in Spanish and French, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish and Japanese.

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• Lists Spanish and signed Masses for Hearing Impaired Masses.

The most current schedules for the churches in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Catholic Schools

Of special interest to parents, The Catholic Schools Week section will feature information about the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, current registration for the next school year, distinguished graduates and more.

Deadline for this section is Jan. 7, 2020.

Call Wanda Koch at 225-387-0983 or email wkoch@diobr.org.

VIRTUE AWARD – Faculty and staff at Catholic Elementary School of Pointe Coupee in New Roads recognize students each quarter for possessing the qualities of a variety of virtues. On Dec. 10, the following students were recognized for the virtues of joy, love, patience and peace: Kylie Boudreaux, Katie Glaviano, Jack Logan, Kegan Blanchard, Braxton Fortie, Amelia Gradney, Sadie McDuff, Gideon Hughes, Camden Cazayoux, Lawson Sanders, Brynn Boudreaux, Piper Jarreau, Stella Cain, Alli Fabre, Samuel Gradney, Grace Ducote, Juliet Cotten, Grant Carriere, Sawyer Pouriou, Logan Olinde, Beau Soulier, Chloe Aucoin, Cole Yarbrough, Mia Meadows, Isabel Loreno, Vivien Anders, Annabelle Garig, Karlee Ledet, Gunner LeJeune, Emma Lindsly, Jamei St. Cyr, Hayes Collins, Stratton Cain, Adelyn Disottell, Ainsley Hernandez, Brady Fabre, Andrew Smith, Olivia Cotten, Isabella David, Elizabeth Armand, Joshua Ramagos, Victoria Bergeron, Josie Hart, Reid Soulier, Isabella Yates, Keith Guidry, Paige Brown, Kooper Burke, Copper Walker, Lyla Johnson, Ella Doucet, Connor Aucoin, Cameren Chapman, Alex Beatty, Nicholas Vosburg, Colby Canezaro, Jude Morrison, Avery Gunter, Abigayle Vallet and Anna Wells. Provided by Megan Girlinghouse | Catholic Elementary School of Pointe Coupee

TEACHER AND STUDENTS HONORED – Holy Ghost School in Hammond announced kindergarten teacher Jennifer Owens as Teacher of the Year and sisters Reese and Riley Fitzhugh Students of the Year. Pictured, from left, are Reese Fitzhugh, Owens and Riley Fitzhugh. Photo provided by Cindy Wagner | Holy Ghost School

ADVENT IS HERE! – To begin the Advent season, Father Reuben Dykes, pastor of Mater Dolorosa Church in Independence, blesses the Advent wreath at Mater Dolorosa School in Independence while all students participated. Pictured, Ezra Authelem helps Father Reuben by holding the book of prayers. Photo provided by Erin Mendez | Mater Dolorosa School

HOME SWEET HOME – Students in Patty Fell’s Family and Consumer Science class at St. Michael the Archangel High School in Baton Rouge made gingerbread houses to celebrate the season. Pictured, from left, are Leah Gil, Elizabeth Angel and Tess Beurle. Photo provided by Kaye Selig | St. Michael High School

Catholic Schools Week

Catholic Schools

Provided by Cindy Wagner | Holy Ghost School
The Good Liar
Warner Bros.

Elegant but ultimately dark suspense yarn in which a ruthless con man (Ian McKellen) sets his sights on the fortune of a vulnerable, naive widow (Helen Mirren), skillfully ingratiating himself with her after initially making contact through a dating website. Despite the objections of her worried grandson (Russell Tovey), she gradually falls into his trap. But savvy viewers will sense from the start that things are more complicated than they initially appear. Director Bill Condon’s sophisticated adaptation of Nicholas Searle’s novel, which also features Jim Carter as the trickster’s partner, offers intelligent and brainy and satisfying movie. Brief gory violence with some gore, relentless rough and crude language. L; R

21 Bridges
STX

Harshly violent crime drama that never explores the many themes it hints at raising. After a major drug theft ends with the grisly deaths of eight police officers, a detective (Chadwick Boseman) who has, for years, tried to avenge the demise of his father in the line of duty, is among those on the trail of two merciless bad guys (Stephan James and Taylor Kitsch) whose egress from Manhattan is blocked by the shutting down of the structures of the title. In the pursuit, he has to decide whether his search for justice should be tempered with mercy. Director Brian Kirk and screenwriters Adam Mervis and Matthew Michael Carnahan never let this promising structure produce much in the way of surprise or even reflection. Taut pacing, in this case, is no cover for failed aspirations, while the film’s high body count and splatter factor as well as its numbing drumbeat of foul dialogue necessitate a restrictive classification. Pervasive gun violence with some gore, violent crime, a same-sex kiss, occasional rough and crude language, references to sexual activity. A-III; R

Knives Out
Universal

Splendid comic whodunit in which a shrewd Southern detective (Daniel Craig) is hired by an anonymous client to investigate the death of a famous and wealthy crime novelist (Christopher Plummer). Though the police lieutenant (LaKeith Stanfield) and trooper (Noah Segan) assigned to the case insist it was suicide, the sleuth seeks answers among the eccentric members of the deceased’s conflict-ridden family (Chris Evans, Jamie Lee Curtis, Michael Shannon, Don Johnson and Toni Collette, among others). He also enlists the help of the late author’s caring and sensible Latina nurse (Ana de Armas). Writer-director Rian Johnson’s richly entertaining ensemble homage to Agatha Christie has clever twist and turns, abundant humor and sly social commentary. Though strictly for grown-ups, it’s a brainy and satisfying movie. Brief gory violence, a morally complex situation, drug use, sexual references, about a dozen profanities, a few milder oaths, a couple of rough terms, frequent crude and crass language, an obscene gesture. A-III; PG-13

Queen & Slim
Universal

Volatile drama examining the alienation between the police and the African American community. Driving home from a first date, a couple of new acquaintances (Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith) are stopped and harassed by a white officer (Sturgill Simpson). As the situation escalates, the cop wounds the young woman and is, in turn, shot dead by the young man. In a panic, the duo flees from Ohio to New Orleans where they take temporary refuge with her estranged uncle (Bokeem Woodbine). He helps them plan an escape to Cuba via Florida and the further stages of their journey find them being aided by a white couple (Chloe Sevigny and Flea) and forming a brief friendship with a youngster (Jahi Di’Allo Winston) who regards them as heroes. As scripted by Lena Waithe, director Melina Matsoukas’ film doesn’t consistently show the restraint and balance its mortally serious subject matter requires. And, while it includes a welcome emphasis on faith and a sober portrayal of the mayhem inherent in the story, the seamy atmosphere that surrounds Woodbine’s character is followed up by a needlessly prolonged and explicit sex scene. Some gory violence, strong sexual content, including graphic premarital sexual activity with upper female and rear nudity, drug use, a couple of profanities, a few milder oaths, pervasive rough and crude language. O; R

Love and Mercy: Faustina
Kondrat-Media

Polish filmmaker Michal Kondrat’s docudrama tells the story of the birth and growth of the devotion to Divine Mercy that originated with the visions of Jesus (Bartosz Ziemniak) experienced in the 1930s by St. Faustina Kowalska (Kamila Kaminska). Seamlessly combining reenactments with interviews and narration, the film recounts how the saint’s early death at age 33 left her confessor and spiritual director (Maciej Malyza) to continue working on her behalf to fulfill the requests that Jesus had made of her, including the establishment of a feast of Divine Mercy for the universal church. A sequence exploring how scientists have compared the original painting with the image on the Shroud of Turin is especially2

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Nueva misión para profesor

Por Richard Meek
El Comentarista Católico

Rita Rangel acarició ansiosamente la taza de café, dándole un abrazo al tipo Barrosco como si fuera su propio Trofeo de Heisman personal. Quizás lo fue.

Para Rangel, la taza, presentada por su clase de inglés como segunda lengua, fue el adorno de una carrera docente de casi 40 años en el Centro Católico de Cristo Rey en Baton Rouge. En esta tarde en particular, también fue su penúltima clase ya que dos días después se retiró de un puesto que ha ocupado desde 1982.

"Tengo hermosos recuerdos", dijo la nativa de Nicaragua de 91 años. "Extrañaré a la señora que me dio estas tazas, con el nombre de mis clases, mientras se reunión en su casa. "Me concentré en el ministerio mientras el buen Señor me lo permita."

Ella nos hizo recordar que cuando aprendíamos a leer, escribir y contar, pero también que los hombres y mujeres que tratan de ayudar a otros a través de nuestra enseñanza y cuidado personal, también están haciendo un gran trabajo.

¿Qué más podría decir? Cada uno de nosotros recordará la vida y el trabajo de Rita Rangel, una gran profesora y líder.

December 20, 2019
PAGINA EN ESPAÑOL
The Catholic Commentator

Solution on page 18
Keeping faith through Christmas

Every year as Christmas draws near I call to mind the good memories of family celebrations, Christmas feasts, the lighting of the final candle of our family Advent wreath and midnight Mass. I am sure that many of us have these same kind of memories of family gatherings and rituals that create a deep spiritual joy that is uniquely connected to the Advent and Christmas season. Yet, as strong as these memories are, it may seem the connection with the deep spiritual meaning of Christmas seems to fade each year and all the busyness of our Christmas celebration seems to be more disconnected from the wonder and joy we should feel as we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ.

When I was growing up there was never any doubt for me that everything my family did for Christmas was centered on our faith. Before the Christmas tree was decorated, we put up the manger scene. At every dinner meal for the four weeks before Christmas we lit a family Advent wreath and all our celebrations and dinners were scheduled around going to Mass and any other religious events at the church.

It is so easy to lose the heart of our spiritual joy at Christmas by losing the spiritual center of the season. Slowly, without realizing it, we make our Christmas Day family schedule THEN we decide when or whether we have time for Mass. We may have long ago stopped planning to make time to attend an Advent penance service to prepare spiritually for Christmas.

As the activities of Christmas become more separated from a spiritual center we become more frantic, demanding and less willing to make time for prayer, quiet and for anything that will complicate the schedule. For example, we may decide out of our stress, that there is no room for anyone else for dinner, especially for “you-know-who” because they will mess things up. At this point we might be accused of sounding like the innkeeper who told the Holy Family there is no room at the inn. Our Christmas celebration becomes so self-centered that we squeeze out a space for our savior.

We can change. A few years ago my family decided we were buying too many presents and the frantic rush to give everyone a gift was taking the joy out of Christmas. So we decided to choose names and only buy one gift for the one person whose name we chose. The next Christmas we were able to approach Christmas Day with calm and more time to reflect upon the wonder of God's love.

If you feel you are losing it, or you are becoming a Christmas grouch, then take time to prayerfully consider where your faith in Christ is in all this activity. The first step is not to change what you do, it is to discover why you are doing it. When you have discovered why you no longer invite Christ at the center then not only will everything find its place, but you will be free to make room for the unexpected.

You might even open your door to the unexpected or difficult guest and discover they are not in your way, but they may be THE WAY to act in a loving manner and truly celebrate the meaning of Christmas, something the innkeeper never discovered in Bethlehem. By grounding ourselves in the deeper spiritual meaning of Christmas we are able to find hope and joy even when it is hard.

Yes for some this is a hard time of the year! For some there are no warm memories of Christmas celebrations with their family. For others, the easy joy of this year's celebration has been broken by the death or illness of a loved one. For someone who has lost their job it is difficult to create the memories that come with Christmas dinners and gifts for the family. Especially in these moments the truest meaning of the love of God is revealed: Our savior came to take away every day of our sin. We celebrate the Christmas season to give us hope even in these darkest moments. When we are poor and in need we discover our deepest faith and the most profound gifts that Jesus offers.

So in the end think of it this way: If on Christmas Eve you took away every decoration, light, Christmas tree and evidence of Christmas and cancelled every gathering and dinner, on Christmas morning, when you awoke, would your heart still be filled with the joy of celebrating the birth of our savior? When the answer to this is honestly YES, then everything else you do will find its proper place. I pray your Advent has been and Christmas will be a time of grace and blessing for you and your whole family. Merry Christmas!

A time of waiting and living in thanksgiving

Thanksgiving has come and gone as a feast day to be celebrated, and we will be in the third week of Advent by the time you read this. But there is a connection between Advent, Christmas and Thanksgiving. There have been some good columns in The Catholic Commentator telling us about this Advent season of hope as we long for Jesus to be born anew in our hearts. Also, they have described the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming and the liturgies that prepare us for Christmas. In one of Charles Dickens’s books a character says that it would be wonderful if we could celebrate Christmas all year long. Wouldn’t the merchants love that? Well, it is “Giving Tuesday” as I write this, and along with their donation envelope the Christophers have sent me this month’s “Christopher News Notes” asking the question, “What would happen if we were willing to ‘live in thanksgiving’ the whole year through?”

It is good that Advent and Christmas and the whole liturgical year’s cycle follow Thanksgiving, for every Mass throughout the liturgical year is an act of thanksgiving for the presence of Jesus and his Gospel message in our lives. “If the only prayer you said your whole life was ‘thank you,’ that would suffice,” said Meister Eckhart, German mystic. But, we have to live those prayers of thanksgiving in our day-to-day lives.

Each day the Mass ends with “Go to love and serve the Lord” or some other phrasing of Jesus’ final command to the apostles to spread his Gospel of love of God through love of neighbor.

Christopher News Notes has some great suggestions for “living in thanksgiving.” As this little leaflet says, “Most of us live our lives knowing on some level that we are grateful for our blessings, even if we don’t say it out loud.” But practicing “intentional gratitude” is different. If we want to practice “soul-touching gratitude” we could keep a running list of kindnesses we have received. If the God we worship is a trinity of love, then his kingdom here on earth should reflect God’s eternal community of love.

Christopher News Notes also reports an interview on National Public Radio with a 90-year-old lady named Judith Viorst, an author of children’s books. She says that her favorite time of life is right now. “It’s not that the days themselves are so fabulous. My hair is thinning. My body is not. I can’t find my glasses or keys. And I spend so much time seeing specialists that, if they gave doctors certificates for going to doctors, I’d easily have earned a Ph.D.” she writes. Viorst gives credit for her joyous perspective to the fact that she is lucky enough to be conscious of her blessings and her good fortune. “I’ve found that a little surplus of gratitude often has downstream effects, helping us become more tolerant, less judgmental, more forgiving,” she wrote.

Another optimist, Pope Francis, would agree. On his visit to New York City in 2015, he preached, “Joy springs from a grateful heart. Truly, we have received much, so many graces, so many blessings, and we rejoice in this. It will do us good to think back on our lives with the grace of remembrance. Gratitude and hard work; these are two pillars of the spiritual life. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: are we good at counting our blessings?”

Gratitude is fundamental in Jesus’ way of life. Even science shows the importance of gratitude.

A study was conducted at the University of California-Davis. Three groups were asked to keep journals of different daily experiences. The first had to keep a gratitude journal, the second a journal of their daily hassles, and the third a journal of “neutral” daily events. The results showed that those who kept the gratitude journal “exercised more regularly, had fewer physical ailments, and felt better about their lives and more optimistic about the future.” And they were more likely to help someone with a personal problem or offer emotional support to another.

“Yes,” you may say, “but life beats some people down.”

SEE CARVILLE PAGE 17
Justice and charity – revisited

We’re all familiar, I suspect, with the difference between justice and charity. Charity is giving away some of your time, energy, resources and person so as to help others in need. And that's an admirable virtue. Justice, on the other hand, is less about directly giving something away than it is about looking to change the conditions and systems that put others in need.

No doubt, we’re all familiar with the little parable used to illustrate this difference. In brief, it goes like this: A town situated on the edge of a river finds itself confronted every day by a number of bodies floating downstream in the river. The townsfolk tend to the bodies, ministering to the wounded and dead bodies floating in the river each day. The townsfolk are good-hearted as well, the charitable townsfolk aren't even remotely and charitable, but that in itself isn't changing the situation that's bringing them wounded and dead bodies daily. As we all know, the charitable townsfolk aren't even remotely aware that their manner of life, seemingly completely unconnected to the wounded and dead bodies they’re daily attending to, might in fact be contributing to the cause of those lost lives and dreams and that, good-hearted as they are, they may be complicit in something that's harming others, even while it's affording them the cause of those lost lives and dreams and that, good-hearted alone is not enough. It's a start, a good one, but more is asked of us. I suspect most of us already know this, but perhaps we’re less conscious of something less obvious, namely, that our very generosity itself might be contributing to a blindness that lets us support (and vote for) the exact political, economic and cultural systems which are to blame for the wounded and dead bodies we’re attending to in our charity.

That our own good works of charity can help blind us to our complicity in injustice is something highlighted in a recent book by Anand Giridharada, “Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World.” In a rather unsettling assertion, Giridharada submits that generosity can be, and often is, a substitute for and a means of avoiding the necessity of a more just and equitable system and fairer distribution of power. Charity, wonderful as it is, is not yet justice; a good heart, wonderful as it is, in not yet good policy that serves the less-privileged; and philanthropy, wonderful as it is, can have us confuse the charity we’re doing with the justice that’s asked of us. For this reason among others, Giridharada submits that public problems should not be privatized and relegated to the domain of private charity, as is now so often the case.

Christiana Zenner, reviewing his book in America, sums this up by saying: “Beware of the temptation to idealize a market or an individual who promises something away than it is about looking to change the conditions and systems that put others in need. When we live with unjust systems that violate others we can be blind to our own complicity because we can feel good about ourselves because our charity is helping those who have been violated.

For example: Imagine I’m a good-hearted man who feels a genuine sympathy for the homeless in my city. As the Christmas season approaches I make a large donation of food and money to the local food bank. Further still, on Christmas Day itself, before I sit down to eat my own Christmas dinner, I spend several hours helping serve a Christmas meal to the homeless. My charity here is admirable, and I cannot help but feel good about what I just did, and what I did was a good thing! But, then, when I support a politician or a policy that privileges the rich and is unfair to the poor, I can more easily rationalize that I’m doing my just part and that I have a heart for the poor, even as my vote itself helps ensure that there will always be homeless people to feed on Christmas day.

Few virtues are as important as charity. It’s the sign of a good heart. But the deserved good feeling we get when we give of ourselves in charity shouldn’t be confused with the false feeling that we’re really doing our part.

OBLATE FATHER RON ROLHEISER, theologian, teacher and award-winning author, is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He can be contacted through his website ronrolheiser.com and facebook.com/ronrolheiser.
St. Agnes Masses – A St. Charbel Healing Mass will be held Sunday, Dec. 22, 6 p.m., at St. Agnes Church, 749 East Blvd., Baton Rouge. Also, Father Joey Angeles will celebrate a Simbang Gabi Masses, a Filipino Christmas tradition, Friday, Dec. 20, Saturday, Dec. 21 and Monday, Dec. 23, 7 p.m., at St. Agnes. For more information, call 225-383-4147.

Carmelite Day of Discernment – The Discalced Carmelite Monastery, 73530 River Road, Covington, will host a free Day of Discernment for single women between 16-35 on Saturday, Jan. 4, 10:30 a.m. – 2 p.m. For more information and to register, visit pelezodc@gmail.com.

New Orleans Retreats – The Archdiocese of New Orleans Retreat Center, 5500 St. Mary St., Metairie, will host the following retreats: “Becoming a Disciple of Christ”, by Father Glenn LeCompte, of the Diocese of Orleans Retreat Center, 5500 St. Mary St., Metairie, Dec. 23, 7 p.m., at St. Agnes. For more information, call 504-987-1420.

St. Thomas Aquinas Regional Catholic High School
Hammond, Louisiana
STA seeks a talented, educational leader to strengthen Catholic identity and culture academic and students programs. Founded in 1986 in Hammond, Louisiana, St. Thomas Aquinas High (STA) provides outstanding Catholic education based on the Dominican philosophy of Veritas to families in Tangipahoa Parish. With a student population of approximately 310 students in Grades 9 – 12, STA has expanded and upgraded the physical plant over the years to accommodate advancements in instruction and programming. The one-to-one iPad program is embraced across the curriculum as academic accomplishment continues to rise. Professional staff and supportive board members engage to fulfill the mission to teach Gospel values in an environment of academic excellence.

Applicants who meet the following criteria will be considered:
• Practicing Catholic (Required)
• Minimum of Five Years of Experience in Special Education (Preferred)
• Demonstrated Leadership Skills (Required)

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HELP WANTED
Special Education Program Administrator
Seeking educational leader for Blessed Margaret of Castello REACH Program
Since 1962, the Diocese of Baton Rouge has served families through the Special Education Department, which has expanded programming across the diocese to provide specific classes for autism and intellectual/other exceptionalities as well as resource and dyslexia lab services. The Special Education Administrator is responsible for the leadership of the program, working with families, teachers, staff, host school personnel, community stakeholders, and the Catholic Schools Office. Additional information at www.csobr.org.

Applicants must meet the following criteria:
• Practicing Catholic (Required)
• Master’s Degree, Preferably in Special Education (Required)
• Minimum of Five Years of Experience in Special Education (Preferred)
• Demonstrated Leadership Skills (Required)

Availability on or before January 3, 2020.
Submit letter of interest, resume with references, and copies of transcripts to Special Education Department Administrator Search
Catholic Schools Office
P.O. Box 2028
Baton Rouge, LA 70821-2028

Applications considered upon receipt.

The schools of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, admit students of any race, color, national and ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at its schools. They do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national and ethnic origin in administration of educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other school administered programs.

Diocese of Baton Rouge Catholic Schools Office Principal Opening 2020-21 School Year
St. Thomas Aquinas Regional Catholic High School
Hammond, Louisiana

STA seeks a talented, educational leader to strengthen Catholic identity and culture academic and students programs. Founded in 1986 in Hammond, Louisiana, St. Thomas Aquinas High (STA) provides outstanding Catholic education based on the Dominican philosophy of Veritas to families in Tangipahoa Parish. With a student population of approximately 310 students in Grades 9 – 12, STA has expanded and upgraded the physical plant over the years to accommodate advancements in instruction and programming. The one-to-one iPad program is embraced across the curriculum as academic accomplishment continues to rise. Professional staff and supportive board members engage to fulfill the mission to teach Gospel values in an environment of academic excellence.

Applicants who meet the following criteria will be considered:
• Practicing Catholic
• Minimum of five years of experience in education, preferably in Catholic high schools
• Demonstrated Effective Leadership Ability
• Qualifications to meet the Non-Public certification requirements for State of Louisiana

Available on or before July 1, 2020
Mail resumé, copies of all college transcript(s) showing degrees and three letters of recommendation to:
St. Thomas Aquinas Principal Search
Catholic Schools Office
P.O. Box 2028
Baton Rouge, LA 70821-2028
Deadline: February 1, 2020

Applications considered upon receipt.

Additional information at www.csobr.org

The schools of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, admit students of any race, color, national and ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at its schools. They do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national and ethnic origin in administration of educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other school administered programs.
Harvey said many people have a misconception that if people try the harder drugs one time at a party they will get hooked.

“That’s really not the way we usually see how a substance use disorder takes place. It usually develops over time, it develops slowly from repeated use,” said Harvey.

Nevertheless, the damage is ruthless.

When someone comes into the emergency room, the medical staff uses the SBIRT process: screening; brief intervention and referral to treatment. Depending on the nature and severity of the disorder, treatment can include inpatient hospitalization, intensive outpatient treatment or outpatient treatment.

“There’s a spectrum of care we offer people,” said Harvey.

The medical staff’s goal is to get people into support programs as soon as possible, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and SMART recovery.

Harvey, a member of Our Lady of Mercy Church in Baton Rouge, spoke highly of the 12 steps applied by AA, which basically calls for people admitting their powerlessness over the addiction, recognition of a higher power to overcome their addiction, making amends to people harmed unless further contact with the people would further harm them, resolving to change their behavior and helping others facing the same struggle.

Family members of addicted loved ones can also receive support through programs such as Al-Anon and Nar-Anon.

Harvey and Father Al Davidson, pastor of St. Joseph the Worker Church in Pierre Part, said ideally people’s “bottoming out” period will lead to a connection with God.

“I think the emotions they have are the same as they have every day, but the holidays tend to exaggerate their loneliness, depression, grief, stress,” said Father Davidson.

He said the devil separates people so they think they are all alone.

“Creation is meant to be a unity of all creation — all people, birds, the fish animals, the plants, all God’s creation is to remain whole and healable,” said Father Davidson.

He said outside of his rectory is a 150-year-old live oak tree that had a limb cut off around 25-30 years ago. He sees God healing that tree, as each year the bark on that limb grows three-quarters of an inch.

“If God made our own physical bodies healable, how more so our souls,” said Father Davidson.

Each day people make a choice between good or bad, right or wrong, God or themselves.

“We get lost by choosing our selves, but with God we find purpose, joy, ultimate happiness and peace,” said Father Davidson.

When people are “under attack” they should turn to others to get people into support programs such as SMART recovery and other programs as soon as possible, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Nar-Anon and Al-Anon and Nar-Anon.

People try the harder drugs slowly from repeated use,” said Harvey.

“We can allow the evil one to take us to dark places or hold onto Christ and be a part of the light, or we can hold onto the evil one and be part of the chaos. The solution is with Jesus Christ,” Father Davidson said.

He said the devil’s destruction is seen especially before Halloween with decorations and entertainment featuring ghosts, ghouls, goblins weaving a macabre web and letting chaos enter the home. “Even when you sit down as a family to watch it (horror movie), it affects the children of different ages and maturity levels in different ways. And we go right to Christmas and take Advent out of the mix. And what better time than Advent to make the home more prayerful, loving and appreciative of what is to come at Christmas,” Father Davidson said.

Added to that is preoccupation with shopping, hunting, fishing, Christmas parties and other activities which don’t bring one closer to knowing Christ.

Instead of filling their minds up with their own version of a “picture holiday,” people must allow God to paint the picture, which is more joyful and peaceful, said Father Davidson.

He and Harvey emphasized people’s ultimate healing comes from bringing their brokenness to God, who will fill them with hope, not temporary fixes.

“Recovery is possible,” said Harvey. “We’ve seen people get better. It’s not how many times you fall down, but how many times you get back up.”

“TO me true wisdom from God is taking lived experiences, own our sinfulness, and letting God wash our experiences and sins in the blood of Christ and making them white as wool and giving them back to us so that we then can help others,” said Father Davidson. “That’s true wisdom, not learned from a book or taught but given to us from Christ himself.”

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Clothing drive helps babies in Christ’s hometown

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The ask for baby items heading to the Holy Land couldn’t be more appropriate: “swaddling clothes needed.”

The Gospel of Luke mentions, after all, that Mary wrapped the baby Jesus in “swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

But the “swaddling clothes” of modern times come in the form of onesies, the one-piece clothing item for babies, and it’s the indispensable item the Holy Family Hospital of Bethlehem Foundation has been asking for as a gift to give to newborns in Christ’s birthplace.

Through a clothing drive at Washington’s Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, the hospital has collected a mound of them underneath an altar of St. Francis and the first nativity depiction.

There’s something about clothing a baby in Bethlehem for Christmas, said Michele Burke Bowe, of the hospital’s Washington-based foundation, about the success of the clothing drive now in its fourth year.

The Catholic hospital expects its staff will deliver about 4,700 babies this year.

Though the clothing drive ends in December, the foundation accepts donations for its other works, including a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit cares for critically ill newborns, at birthplaceofhope.org.